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ABSTRACT

This document presents the findings and recommendations of a study that investigated students who leave school before graduating. The study attempted to determine the proportion of young people who leave school early versus those who graduate, and examined the subsequent schooling/training and job experiences of early leavers. The study investigated high school freshmen of the 1981-82 academic year, and the sample consisted of 20 percent of the freshmen class in large metropolitan schools and all freshmen in the remainder of the schools. The following data were collected for each student who left school: parental information; school attendance information; grades; credits accumulated; special education services; and standardized test forms. Thereafter, telephone interviews were conducted with these students and their families. Findings are reported through a series of graphs and pie charts, and the document concludes with a series of policy recommendations and proposals for future study. (TE)

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THOSE WHO LEAVE EARLY:

A Study of Young People Leaving Oregon Schools Prior to Graduation

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June 1987

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The methods, fundings, conclusions, and recommendations offered herein are solely the responsibility of the contracted researchers, and do not necessarily reflect the thoughts and/or opinions of the State Board of Education, the Oregon Department of Education, its Superintendent or employees.

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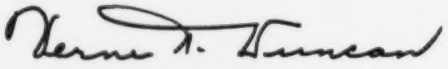
FOREWORD

We are losing a resource we cannot afford to lose—students who leave school early and fail to be graduated with their class. This loss in our classrooms over time turns into a great loss in human potential. A serious look at this lost resource is in order.

This document presents the findings and recommendations of a study of Oregon's early school leavers. The study was conducted independently by the Teaching Research Division, Oregon State System of Higher Education, under contract with the Oregon Department of Education.

I commend Dr. Robert M. Olsen for his work as principal investigator for this study, and the many participants who served in various roles during the study, including the design team, in-school data collectors, telephone interviewers, and others. The cooperation of the "early leavers" and their families was essential to the study, and has been greatly appreciated.

Those conducting the study found that the reasons students leave early are many and subtle, and it is difficult to represent them all. However, they seemed to group themselves into three categories: family, school, and personal reasons. While we have gained some insight into how situations have influenced these early leavers, we also have found that the consequences of leaving early tend to be unfavorable, both for the leaver and for society. This study takes a first step in formulating responsible and effective ways to alleviate the problem.



Verne A. Duncan
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- What is the proportion of young people who leave school early vs. those who graduate?
- What are the subsequent schooling/training and job experiences of early leavers?

METHOD

This study focused exclusively on the student population scheduled to graduate in 1985, the incoming freshmen of the 1981–82 academic year. Two factors somewhat confounded the findings for this group:

1. Usually, more people move into Oregon than leave; yet, during two of the years targeted by this study, there was a net loss in the state's population, probably caused by economic conditions.

2. Students who moved into schools used in this study after beginning the ninth grade are not accounted for in this study.

Members of the Project Design Team were selected for their particular expertise and experience:

- Mike Bullis (Team Chair) and Vic Baldwin from Teaching Research
- Les Adkins, Ron Burge, Pat Ellis, and Bob Siewert from the Oregon Department of Education
- Frank Drysdale from the Center for Advanced Technology, University of Oregon
- Gene Edgar from the Experimental Education Units, University of Washington
- Tom Haladyna from Arizona State University West
- Pat Neill–Carlton of Portland

Dr. Bullis' training is in research design and implementation in the social sciences. Dr. Drysdale has valuable experience in pure research in environmental issues, and a long–standing interest in school–leaving problems. Dr. Edgar has been conducting similar research on secondary school early leaving of Washington students with learning disabilities. Dr. Haladyna is a nationally recognized leader in educational statistics and measurement problems. Dr. Neill–Carlton is a practicing school psychologist in a large suburban school district with valuable experience implementing ethnographic research models and "hands–on" experiences with the population studied.

The sample was carefully designed to ensure that findings could be confidentally generalized to the whole population group. Smaller populations, "cells," were examined for purposes of comparison:

- School size (i.e., over 600, 200 to 599, 75 to 199, less than 75)
- Metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties

Figure 1
Sample Cells Used in the Study

Location	Over 600	599-200	199-75	Less Than 75
Metropolitan				
Non-Metropolitan				

Enrollment in Grades 10-12

Oregon students are not distributed evenly across cells; nearly one-half are in large metropolitan schools and less than two percent are in the very small schools. Therefore, in the largest schools, twenty percent of the freshman class at each school formed the sample, while for the remainder of the schools in the study, all freshmen were included. The distribution of ethnic populations in the state was closely mirrored in the study sample.

Each school principal in the sample was asked to appoint a "data collector" familiar with the student record system, who was paid for participating in the study. On data forms furnished by the study, data collectors were asked to give information about each student who left the school:

- Parental information
- School attendance information
- Grades
- Credits accumulated
- Special education services
- Standardized test scores

Often, information about the parents was not forthcoming, and more than a few students "fell through the cracks," with no pertinent recorded information. Smaller schools could provide information based on personal knowledge of the individuals, but the larger schools' automated systems often lacked the flexibility to supply information needed for this study. Test data was most frequently lacking, perhaps due to the variety of tests used, as well as the mobility of certain students. After the data forms were returned, two steps were taken to assure reliability:

1. Site visits were made to ten percent of the schools to review key points in the data collection process.

2. A random sample of 250 records was drawn from the 3,912 submitted. For these, the data collectors were asked to submit a new data collection form.

The results confirmed the study information as highly reliable.

Telephone Data Collection

Ten telephone interviewers were selected with the following criteria in mind:

- Even temperament; patient, compassionate
- Ability to handle difficult discussions
- Good listener
- Experienced with teenagers; empathetic
- Ability to maintain enough "emotional distance" to accurately record information

Their role in the project was to interview from a prepared script, to probe when necessary, to probe appropriately with total impartiality, to explain the intent or purpose of any item when necessary, to listen carefully, and to record responses and comments with total fidelity.

The interview training was conducted by two research assistants and consisted of:

- review of the interview guide
- observation of a demonstration interview
- two "practice" interviews (one observed by a research assistant)
- monitoring during the study by the research assistant

During a six-week period, a research assistant followed up on each student reported as transferring to another school. Students who became "early leavers," or their parents, were interviewed extensively by telephone. More than 93 percent of those contacted were cooperative participants; the interviews averaged over 35 minutes, sometimes lengthening to more than an hour.

FINDINGS

Re: School Leaving Data

Of the class of 1985, 65.1 percent graduated from the school in which they began their secondary education. Another 10.2 percent transferred one or more times and received a diploma. Therefore, at least 75.3 percent completed their high school education.

Of the remainder of the students:

- 8.9 percent could be located—
  - * 86.8 percent of this group (or their parents) were interviewed.
  - * 13.6 of this group were not interviewed due to armed services duty, incarceration, hostility to the study, etc.
- 15.8 percent were "lost"—it is simply not known whether they went to another school or moved on to other life pursuits.

Figure 2
Statewide Findings -- Graduating/Leaving

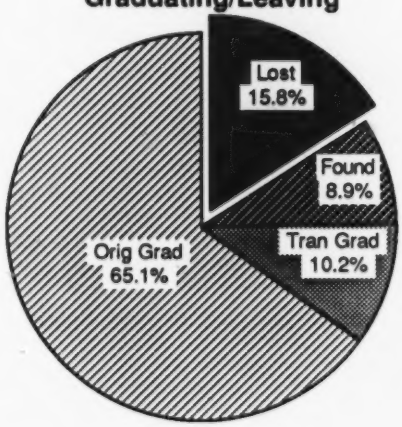
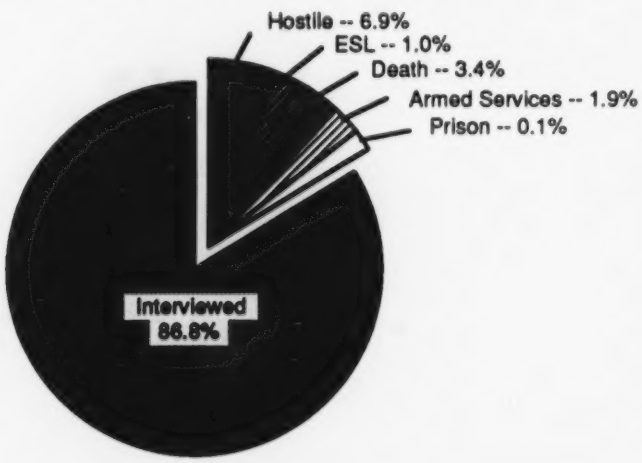


Figure 3
Distribution of "Found"Leavers



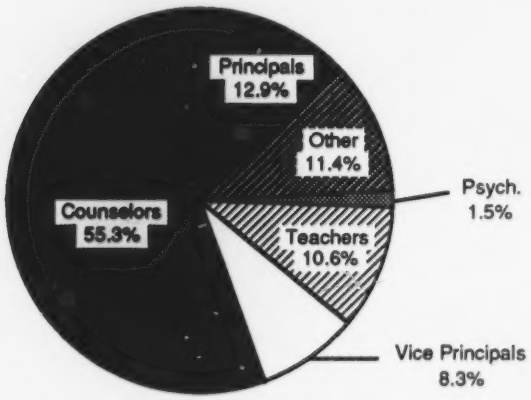
Re: In-School Insights

School leavers in this study exited rather late in their school careers. More than 75 percent left during their junior or senior year. It is at about this time that credit deficits can begin to accumulate and seem insurmountable. More than 17 percent of leavers cited credit deficiencies, which they did know about, as a factor contributing to their decision to leave.

However, 6.3 percent were adamant that they had not left school--rather, they learned, usually in their senior year, that they lacked the number of credits required for a diploma. Three-fourths of this group had attended only one school, so credit deficits due to transferring into districts with different requirements apparently were not a big factor. Furthermore, three-fourths of this group were from the largest schools.

Slightly less than one-half of the leavers talked with any school personnel about their leaving prior to doing so. Leavers who did talk, might speak to a variety of school personnel before leaving. Just over one-half talked with a counselor. Teachers, vice-principals and principals were each visited by about ten percent of those who spoke to school personnel before leaving.

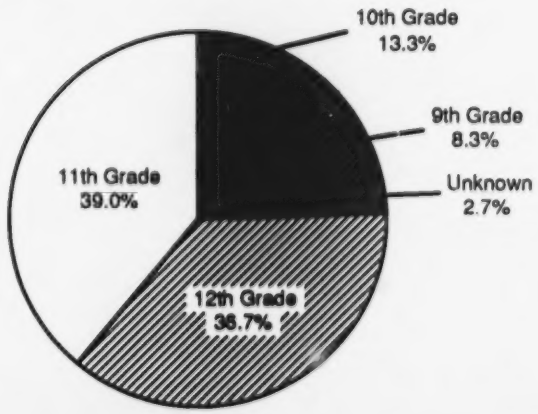
Figure 4
School Personnel Leavers Talked With



Reasons given by leavers for not talking with school personnel:

- 42.3 percent said that they didn't want advice from any of the school personnel.
- 18.6 percent said that they "didn't get along" with staff.
- 13.4 percent reported that they "just didn't think of it."
- 8.2 percent said that there was "no one to talk to."
- 5.2 percent said that school staff were "too busy to talk to me."
- 13.4 percent felt that the "school wasn't interested in me."

Figure 5
School Leaving by Grade Level



The percentage of students eligible for special education in the group of leavers (14%) was close to that of the general student population (10%).

We can make one guarded comparison between leavers and graduates regarding their school mobility, recognizing the tremendous degree to which information about the "lost" subjects could confuse the comparison. Nearly ninety percent of the graduates attended only one high school; 98.5 percent attended one or two schools. In contrast, nearly 60 percent of the leavers attended only one school before leaving. Leavers appear to have more school changes.

Figure 6
Number of Schools Attended by Graduates

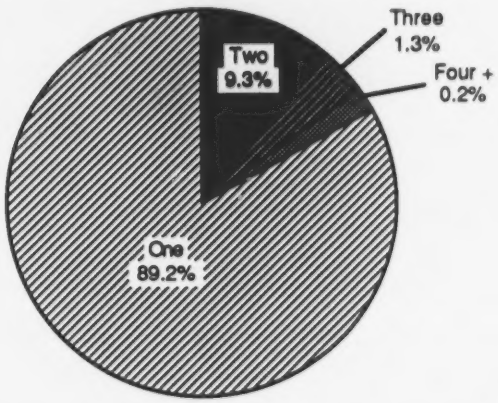
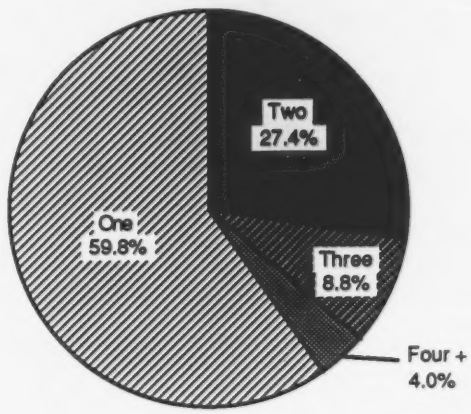


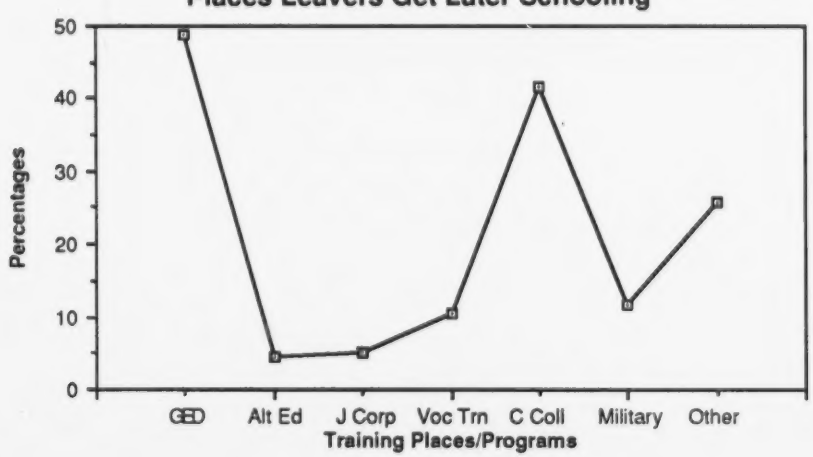
Figure 7
Number of Schools Attended by Leavers



Re: Education/Training Experience After Leaving

More than sixty percent of the leavers have pursued additional schooling in the time between their leaving and this study. Their primary focus was on obtaining a GED (General Education Diploma). Nearly half (49.2%) had finished or were working on that equivalency program. The community colleges were the place of choice for additional schooling/training. Others were cited much less often. One percent were actively engaged in a four-year college program.

Figure 8
Places Leavers Get Later Schooling



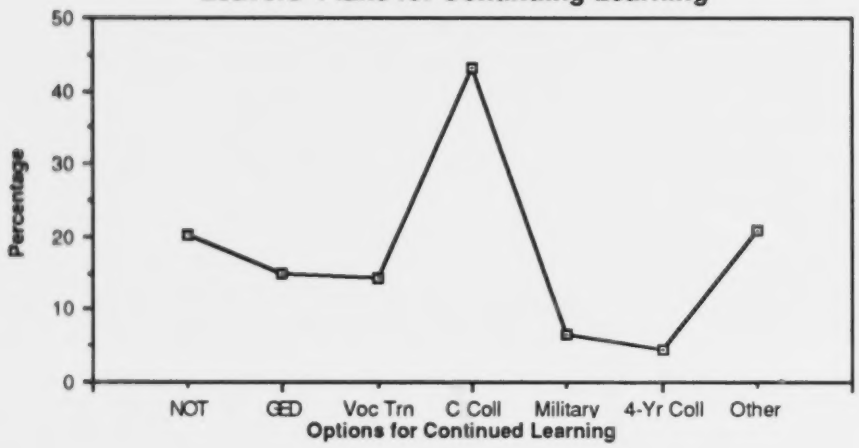
Of those leavers who had not pursued education or training, 26.1 percent said that they "had a good job," and therefore didn't need it. About one in six (16.3%) said that they "had a family to support" and couldn't go to school; 8.7 percent said that they "had too many bills to pay."

When leavers were asked if they had plans to get additional schooling within the next three years, 20.1 percent said no; 15 percent said that they would work on their GED programs, 14.3 percent reported that they would attend some form of formal vocational training, and 4.4 percent targeted a four-year college within the next three years.

The popular choice for future learning, however, was the community college. Overall, 43.3 percent anticipated taking at least some coursework there in the near future.

Figure 9

Leavers' Plans for Continuing Learning

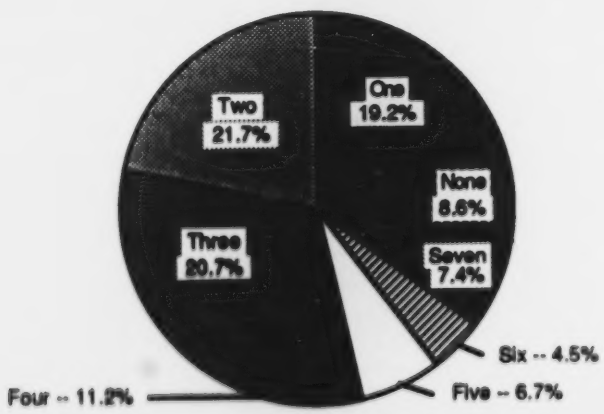


Re: Job Experiences After Leaving

The school leavers apparently had little trouble finding work, but this group had many jobs. They averaged over three jobs (3.06) in a time period that for three-quarters of them was just over two and one-half years. Some had held more than seven jobs in that time period. Only one leaver had held one job continuously for five years, while 8.6 percent reported that they had not worked since leaving school.

Figure 10

Number of Jobs Reported Since Leaving



Just over one-half of the leavers (50.9%) were employed at the time of the study. The average tenure for all jobs had been less than eight months (7.92). Nearly three in five (58.3%) had held their last job (if unemployed at the time of the study), or the job they were currently working, less than six months. There was no apparent significant difference in employment patterns of leavers dependent upon school size or location.

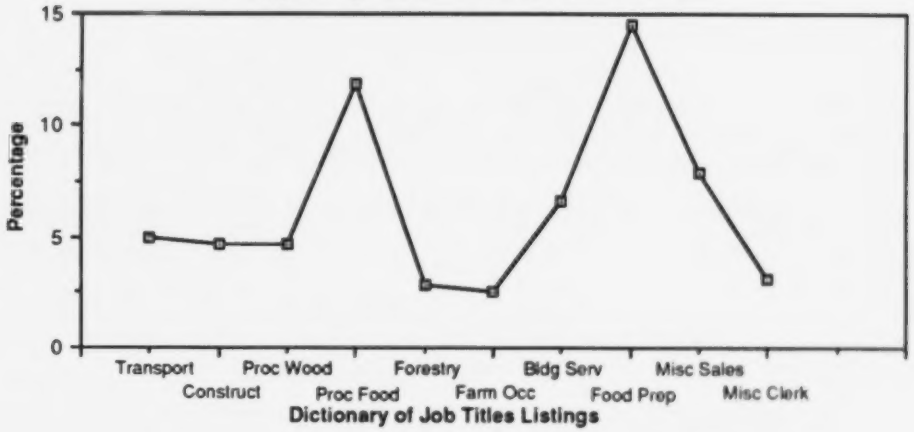
When working, these leavers averaged about three-quarter time employment (32.7 hours per week). Most worked in the minimum pay range.

The types of work performed have been grouped in accordance with the Dictionary of Occupational Titles:

- 29.6 percent worked in service occupations
- 12.9 percent worked in clerical and sales
- More leavers were employed in the food and beverage services—cooks, waitresses, etc., than any other category.
- Food processing, miscellaneous sales, and building services (janitorial, groundskeeping) were the next most often mentioned categories.

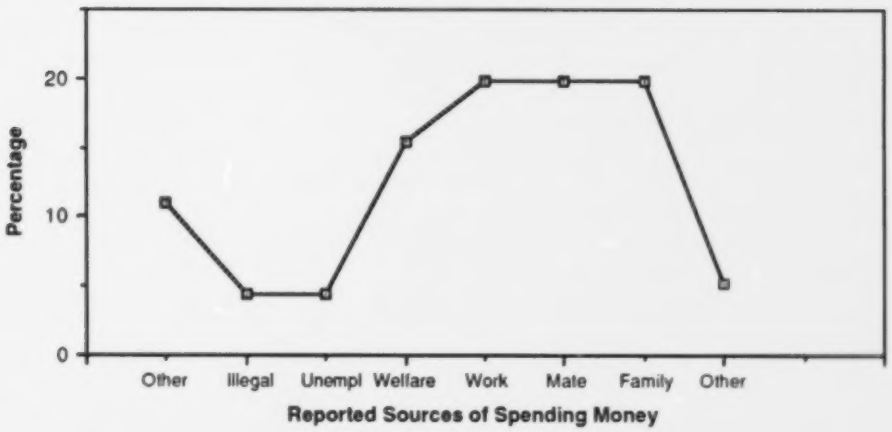
Figure 11

Frequently Listed Leavers' Job Titles



Leavers not employed at the time of this study reported that they got their spending money from their family (those they were living with at the time of the survey) (19.9%), their mate (19.9%), their work (19.9%), from welfare (15.4%), or one or more social service agencies (10.9%). One in twenty (5.2%) freely reported getting their spending money through a variety of illegal activities.

Figure 12
Leavers' Reported Sources of Money



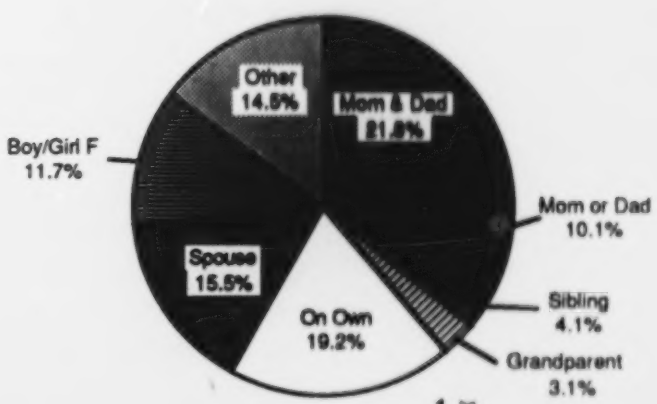
Re: Some Personal and Family-Related Information

A few questions were asked of the leavers concerning their personal and family situations just before they left school, and again at the time of the study. During the school year prior to leaving school, 41.8 percent had held a job. More than twice as many students in the larger schools worked than did students in the smaller schools.

Nearly one-half (46.9%) reported they had no access to a car while in school. Less than one-third (31.1%) had their own car prior to leaving.

At the time of the study, about 21.8 percent of the leavers were living with their mother and father (excluding step-parents). About half as many (10.1%) were living with either their mother or their father. Most, seven in ten, were living outside of the nuclear family that supported them during their high school years. Some leavers lived with brothers, sisters, or grandparents. Nearly one in five (19.2%) lived on their own or with a roommate. At the time of the study 17.0 percent told us that they were married, but 15.5 percent were living with their spouse. Another 11.7 percent of the leavers were living with a girlfriend or boyfriend.

Figure 13
Where Leavers are Living Now



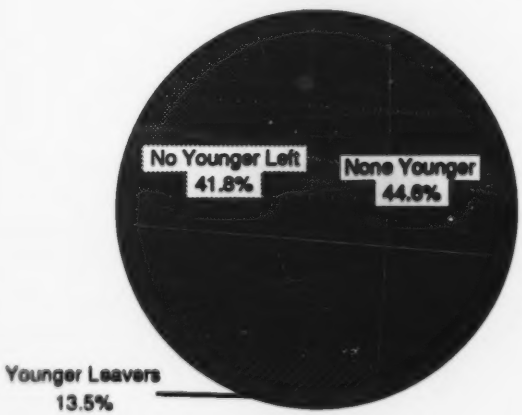
At the time of the study, 19.1 percent of the leavers reported having children: 13.8 percent had one, 4.7 percent had two children, and .6 percent had three.

About three–quarters of the leavers had older brothers and/or sisters. Of this group of leavers, nearly six in ten had at least one older brother and/or sister leave school before graduating.

Figure 14
Leavers and Older Siblings

Just over half (55.4%) of the leavers had younger siblings. Of this group of leavers, 23.1 percent had at least one younger sister or brother leave school before graduating.

Figure 15
Leavers and Younger Siblings



Re: Reasons for Leaving

When asked why they left school, many expressed general disinterest, boredom with schooling:

- 22.9 percent said they were bored.
- 10.8 percent said they disliked school.
- 10.8 percent said they felt hassled by administrators.
- 12.4 percent said teachers hassled them.
- 17.8 percent said that they were too far behind in their credits to catch up.
- 13.0 percent said that they were failing too many classes.

Other less direct reasons were also given:

- 10.8 percent said that they were abused by their families in ways ranging from sexual abuse to constant psychological pressure.
- 8.5 percent were involved with drugs.
- 1.7 percent had alcohol problems.
- 6.7 percent left because of pregnancy.
- 1.0 percent left to support their nuclear families.
- 4.8 percent succumbed to peer pressure to quit school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School Record Keeping

It became clear during this study that student recordkeeping and archiving in Oregon high schools are inadequate. Further, school personnel are burdened with recordkeeping that seems trivial and repetitive. Often they can see no logical purpose for the requested information, either for their own use or for use by any other agency.

> Recommendation: The Oregon Department of Education should develop a minimally intrusive data collection system by which information about school leavers can be collected in a timely fashion during the school year. Redundant information requests must be eliminated. Information which is available elsewhere should be collected elsewhere. There must be systematic, individual feedback to schools so each can assess its own position regarding school leavers, relative to the state as a whole.

Credit Deficits Too Late Discovered

Clearly, there is some responsibility on the part of the school to report a credit deficit as soon as the student begins to fall behind.

> Recommendation: The ODE should conduct, or support, a study of the practices in public high schools related to recording and monitoring students' academic credit status. Particular attention should be focussed on the methods by which schools identify students with credit deficits and notify the student of those deficits.
>
> Representatives of the community of school counselors should be involved in this work.

The Option of Choice

Close to one-half of the leavers in this study moved from the public school to a community college for some type of educational or training experience. Most Oregonians have ready geographic access to a community college. Also, there is an atmosphere of independence and flexibility at a community college not found at very many secondary schools.

> Recommendation: Oregon's community college system ought to work cooperatively with representatives from the public secondary schools (e.g., COSA) to determine:
>
> a. The characteristics of the community college that early leavers find attractive.
> b. If those features can, and should, be included in the secondary schools in an effort to keep the potential leaver there.
> c. How to best install those desirable features in high schools if the decision is to do so.
> d. If those features cannot or should not be included in the secondary schools, decide how to best "hand off" the leaver to the community college.

Finding the "Lost Leavers"

While what we have reported is highly accurate, it is still not all of the picture.

> Recommendation: An intensive follow-up study should be organized to locate and account for the 15.8 percent classified as "lost" in this study. Not every individual need be located to statistically allocate accurate proportions to the "transfer/graduate" group or the "leaver" group.
>
> Various human service agencies could cooperatively share information in the locating effort. The value of the work done to date would be increased many times with this additional effort.

Comparing Leavers and Stayers

What are the characteristics that distinguish the leaver from the stayer? Once we know, we can determine if those characteristics can be treated or modified through the public schools or public service agencies of the state. This will help us to take action where limited resources can have the best likelihood of success.

> Recommendation: A cooperative look needs to be taken to separate leavers from stayers according to naturally observed factors. This work needs to be more intensive—larger in scope than the concluded study, needing to follow at least three times as many students. The resulting information will provide the most solid foundation for developing successful responses to the problem.

FUTURE STUDY

While the current project has provided a clear picture of the early leaver, there is not yet enough comparative information to differentiate Oregon students who complete school from those who do not. The Design Team therefore has proposed the following tasks for future study, building logically from the data currently on hand.

Task One: Conduct and report further analyses of data on hand.

- Identify relationships between the variables describing the leavers in this study.

Task Two: "License" the database for further inquiry by other interested parties but preserve confidentiality.

- Examine, from different viewpoints, the data collected in this study. Allow hypotheses developed by other interested parties (e.g., guidance counselors) to be tested.

Task Three: Disseminate the current findings to a broad group of audiences.

- At-risk issues touch many disciplines within education and social service fields. The strength of the methodology of the current study assures that the findings can be widely reported.

- One-day training sessions can be individualized specifically for guidance counselors, principals, administrators, community college personnel, county planning teams and other groups.

Task Four: Eliminate the need to report some students in the current study as "lost."

- In spite of all of the effort expended to track leavers in the current study, some were not found. At least 75.3 percent graduated from high school and 8.9 percent left school before completing their studies; the "lost" 15.8 percent are usually reported as leavers. But this is not a legitimate interpretation of the data.

- The result is that we probably under-report the schools' successes and over-assume their shortcomings. This can and should be corrected by sampling the "lost" leavers.

Task Five: Conduct a study, over two years, of students who leave school and a comparable group who do not leave.

- We cannot, from the current study, distinguish the leaver from the stayer. Nor, therefore, can we reasonably identify students who are at risk of leaving.

- We must identify those students who fall into the "at risk" category in order to deliver a precise, effective intervention prior to the leaving. Interventions after leaving are not of much value to the leaver — the damage has already been done.

- Further, althouth difficult to measure, there are very real financial and social costs to society for every leaver.

- A comparative study is the next necessary step in learning how to best meet the needs of at risk students.

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